

Managing Stress

Stress affects the body in a number of ways both physically and psychologically. It is particularly important to understand stress when living with chronic pain since the central nervous system can become highly sensitive when you have been in pain for a long time. Stress can increase our experience of pain because of the already sensitive nervous system.



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It's therefore important to build up our understanding and coping strategies to manage stress and low mood effectively.

How do we define stress?

Let's make a start by thinking about what we mean when we say 'stress'. We can define stress as "the difference between the demands made upon a person and that person's perceived ability to cope with them". It can be a little bit like a set of weigh scales;



In other words, if you feel that you can cope with the demands being asked of you then you will be fine, but if you feel you cannot cope, the balance of the scales will tip and you may end up feeling stressed.

Stress is not a mental illness, nor will it cause mental illness. It is a normal human experience. Most of us will feel stressed at some point in our lives. Stress is what we feel when we are under pressure. It is a completely normal response which we all experience from time to time and is our body's reaction to feeling under threat. It is not dangerous and in certain situations it can be helpful and motivating.

Over to You

Take a moment to write down some things that are making you feel stressed at the moment:

Why do we experience stress?

Stress causes what is known as the fight or flight response, which is found in the majority of animal species. The origins of this can be traced back millions of years. Take cavemen for example: they often had to deal with life-threatening situations, and stress caused their bodies to react quickly - increasing their chances of survival.



Why do we need the fight or flight response today?



Whilst we are not faced with as many life-threatening situations as a caveman would have been, it is still useful. For example, if you are walking through a wood and see a snake, the changes that occur in the body due to stress enable us to deal with the situation more effectively.

What are the signs of stress?

The early warning signs of stress vary person to person. The physical signs we notice are mostly linked to our ancient survival strategy; the fight or flight response as described above. This releases hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline into our body, literally preparing us to do battle or to run away. The pressures we face today are very different from our ancestors and are not usually helped by the fight or flight response. We cannot run away or fight financial difficulties, family problems, and stressful life events or from the other things you wrote it section 2 above. Many people are worried when they feel the signs of stress and think that they may be symptoms of a heart attack or of mental health difficulties. The symptoms of stress are not dangerous and are in fact very common.



What happens in your body when you feel stressed?

These are some of the symptoms of stress:

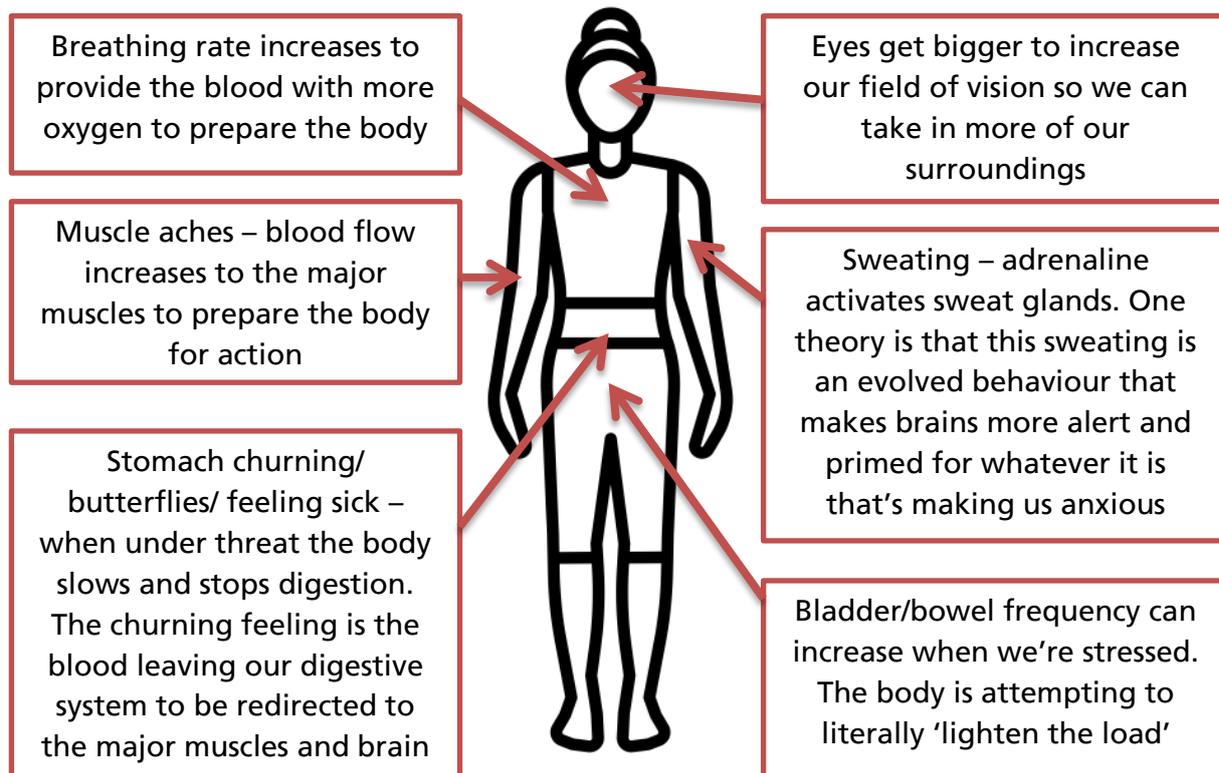
Frequent headaches	Changes to vision
Muscle tension, aches and pains	Feeling sick
Tingling hands	Sweating
Racing heart	Churning stomach
Bowel and bladder problems	Dry mouth
Feelings of tiredness and exhaustion	Changes in breathing; fast, shallow, sometimes breathlessness

Over to You

Tick the ones above that you experience when you are stressed.

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These **physical symptoms** are an indication of your body preparing for fight or flight:



What happens psychologically when you feel stressed?

Being stressed doesn't just affect our bodies, it affects how we think and feel.

Effects on how we feel:

- Worrying all the time
- Having racing thoughts that won't switch off
- Expect the worst
- Thinking negatively
- Criticising yourself and others
- Poor concentration and memory
- Setting too high expectations of yourself and others

Effects on our thinking:

- Angry, irritable and wound up
- Impatient
- Anxious
- Unhappy, upset and tearful
- Lacking in interest
- Overwhelmed and frustrated
- Guilty and worthless

Over to You

Do you notice these things when you feel stressed? Are there any other early warning signs of stress for you? Make some notes below if you wish;

When does stress become a problem?

Stress is not usually a problem in the short-term. As mentioned in earlier, sometimes stress can be motivating and useful. For instance, stress can help you meet daily challenges and motivates you to reach your goals. In fact, stress can help you accomplish tasks more efficiently. It can even boost memory, as in exam situations or job interviews.



Stress becomes a problem if it goes on for a long period of time and can have a negative impact on pain, therefore it is important to recognise when you are stressed. We have already discussed what some of the early warning signs of stress are. It is important to recognise what these signs are for you, as they will be different for each of us, so that we can take steps to manage stress.

Over to You

Pause here to write down all the things that you currently do when you feel stressed (be honest!);

Over to You

There is a tool you may find useful to understand how stress affects you. This is called the **Perceived Stress Scale** and can be found at the end of this section.

How can we reduce stress?

Hopefully you were able to write some ways you are currently using to manage stress above. Some of those things might be healthy, helpful things and some of those may be less healthy.

Here are some more ideas from us:

- Don't take on more than you can handle! Say "no" to people if you need to.
- Slow down and stop rushing around.
- Exercise regularly, as gentle exercise (as approved by your doctor) is an excellent way of reducing stress.
- Reduce your caffeine intake, as caffeine induces stress hormone release.
- Build up a support network of friends and family that you can look to for support.
- Learn to be satisfied with what you do achieve rather than what you don't achieve.
- Make sure you have enough relaxing things to do.
- Make sure you have enough time to do relaxing things



Over to You

Make some notes here if you wish to about whether there are some things you could do differently or if you have thoughts about the above ideas.

Stress Reducing Ideas: How can we manage stress in our body?

As the stress response is largely physical, our body is one of the first things to be affected. Practicing engaging activities, regular relaxation, and mindful breathing can all help in reducing tension and reduce the physical effects of stress.

1. Engaging activities



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Exercise: Taking exercise regularly has great benefits for both our physical and psychological health. It can also be a great way to relieve stress and physical tension. Exercise can reduce levels of the body's stress hormones and stimulate the production of serotonin and endorphins, our natural feel-good hormones. The main thing is to find a form of exercise that is right for your body and that you enjoy, as this will make it much easier to keep doing it regularly.

Hobbies: Anything we do that absorbs, calms and interests us can help to reduce the physical effects of stress on our bodies. As clever as our brains are, we can only truly give one thing our full attention at a time. If are engaged in meaningful activities it can help to give our brains some light relief from getting caught up with stressful thoughts.



Self-Care: There are other ways to calm and soothe ourselves such as taking a warm bath; drinking a cup of your favourite tea; or stroking a pet.

Over to You

What sort of activities do you do currently that help with stressful situations? Make a list here;

2. Relaxation



As well as engaging activity, practicing regular relaxation can help us to manage stress levels. Many people find it hard to relax and our bodies hold physical tension, which can in turn increase pain levels. With practice you can learn skills in relaxation which will help to ease feelings of tension, which can be used anytime you need.

There are lots of different types of relaxation and different things suit different people. You may need to experiment with a variety of strategies to find out what works for you. Before you get started here are some general guidelines on relaxation;

- Make sure that the room is as quiet as possible (you may want to turn off your phone, or ask others that you live with not to disturb you, unless they want to join in)
- Find a comfortable position
- Loosen any tight clothing
- You should practice the relaxation routine at least once a day, or do it more often if you wish
- Try to get into the habit of practicing around the same time every day
- Most people find that their mind wanders when they first start practicing – don't worry about this. If your thoughts wander, gently bring your concentration back to the exercise
- When you have finished allow yourself time to enjoy the relaxed feeling for a few minutes
- Remember, learning to relax is a skill and takes time and regular practice

Relaxation practice: Stop, Drop and Flop

This is a very simple exercise that you can do almost anywhere. This exercise doesn't take up much time meaning you can fit it in around your daily activities. It is particularly good if you carry lots of tension in your neck and shoulders. If you notice that your shoulders are particularly tense, do the following;

- STOP whatever you are doing.
- DROP your shoulders and your chest.
- FLOP your head forwards (taking care of your neck) and breathe slowly through your nose until the tension passes. Try to imagine that you are breathing right down to your belly button and all the way out again.



Over to You

How did that feel? Were you able to release some tension from your neck and shoulders? If you found it useful, you might like to try out practicing it a few times a day (perhaps while you are waiting for the kettle to boil!)

Relaxation practice: Guided visualisation

This exercise is best practised at home, in a quiet environment.

- Sit comfortably, close your eyes and rest your hands on your thighs.
- Picture a safe and pleasurable setting such as your favourite walk, a place in your garden, a park, or a holiday etc. It could be somewhere you've been once; it could be somewhere you've been to many times. It could also be somewhere completely imaginary so long as it somewhere you can feel safe and calm.
- Try to involve all of your senses – what can you see, hear, smell, taste and feel in this place? Try out saying the word 'calm' or 'relax' to yourself as you breathe out.
- Stay in your calm, safe place for as long as you feel you need to before gently bringing yourself back into awareness of the present day.



Over to You

How was that experience? Could you think of a safe, calm place to imagine yourself in? Use this space to make any notes you feel you need to;

Relaxation practice: Progressive muscle relaxation



Start off by finding a comfortable position. This type of relaxation takes you through different muscle groups on the body teaching you firstly to tense, and then relax. Don't tense your muscles too tightly. It should not be painful. When you let go of the tension, your muscles will relax. Think about the difference in the way they feel when they are tense compared to when they are relaxed.

- **Hands** – start with your hands. Clench one fist first and notice the tension in your hand and forearm. Hold it and study the tension for a few seconds...and then relax. You might feel a slight tingling; this is the relaxation beginning to develop.
- **Arms** – bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension especially in your upper arms. Remember, do this for a few seconds and then relax.
- **Neck** – press your head back and roll it gently from side to side. Feel how the tension moves. Then bring your head forward into a comfortable position.
- **Face** – there are several muscles here, but it is enough to think about your forehead and jaw. First raise your eyebrows and then relax the forehead. Now clench the jaw, notice the tension and relax.
- **Shoulders** – Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears and then relax. Notice as the tension eases away as your drop your shoulders down. Circle your shoulders slowly to let go of any remaining tension.

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The practice of mindfulness accepts that thoughts, feelings and memories will come into our minds. Mindfulness is not about denying those things or attempting to ignore or suppress them. It is about noticing that the thoughts are there, choosing not to engage with them and letting the thoughts pass you by.



Imagine that you are on a train platform. The trains coming into the station in front of you are your thoughts, feelings and memories. There is not use denying the trains that are your thoughts are present because you can see them as clear as day. What you can do is decide whether to get on the train and go with it, even if you don't like the journey your thoughts take you on or how you feel when you arrive. The practice of mindfulness is the act of staying on the platform and allowing the trains to pass you by. No matter how many times the same trains come along, keep allowing them to pass you by and focus on the present.

You may like to try the following exercise;

- Find a comfortable position, with your eyes closed and your spine reasonably straight, and with both feet flat on the ground.
- Notice the weight of your body on the chair and the pressure of your feet on the floor.
- Bring your attention to your breathing. There's no need to change how you are breathing in any way, but just notice each breath as you inhale and exhale.
- Notice how the air feels as it enters your nostrils, fills your lungs and leaves again. Be aware of the sensations in your body as you breathe – your nostrils, your chest, your abdomen.
- Thoughts will come into your mind, and that's okay, because that's just what the mind does. Simply notice these thoughts, then bring your attention back to your breathing.
- You might also notice sounds, tension or discomfort in your body, and emotions, and again, just bring your attention back to your breath.
- You don't have to get involved with these thoughts or feelings. Don't judge yourself for having them, or analyse them in any way. It's okay for the thoughts to be there. Just notice these thoughts, and let them go by, bringing your attention back to your breathing.
- It's ok and natural for thoughts to arise, and for your attention to follow them. No matter how many times this happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing.
- When you're ready, start to bring your attention back to the room around you. Move, stretch and open your eyes.



Over to You

How did you find that mindful breathing exercise? Were you able to let thoughts that came up pass you by?

Sometimes it is helpful while practicing mindfulness to imagine that there is a stream in front of you. You can place any thoughts that come up onto a leaf and allow the stream to carry it gently away from you. Remember; it is not about denying or ignoring the thoughts. It is simply about choosing not to engage with them at that given time.

Make any notes about mindfulness here:

Further relaxation resources

The Department of Clinical Health Psychology has produced six free audio relaxation tracks for patients to use. Please read through the general guidelines before you try the exercises. Please consult your GP for advice before using these tracks.

Do not listen to relaxation recordings whilst driving or operating machinery. If the exercises cause you any distress or worrying thoughts do not continue without consulting a health professional.



You can access the free audio relaxation tracks online here;

<http://www.qehkl.nhs.uk/relaxationaudio.asp>

Track Guide

Track 1: Morning beach imagery (9:21mins)

Track 2: Forest visualisation (12mins)

Track 3: Stretch and relax (20:10mins)

Track 4: One Word (2:10)

Track 5: Garden relaxation (18:03)

Track 6: Mindfulness (5:24mins)

Further sources of support

If you feel so stressed that thoughts of harming yourself or ending your own life have been in your mind then please visit your GP as soon as possible and ask for help.

Useful organisations

Mental Health Matters

Tel: 0191 516 3500

Email: info@mhm.org.uk www.mhm.org.uk

A national organisation which provides support and information on employment, housing, community support and psychological services.

Rethink

Tel: 0300 500 0927

Email: advice@rethink.org www.rethink.org

Provides information and a helpline for anyone affected by mental health problems.

Samaritans

Tel: 116 123

Email: jo@samaritans.org www.samaritans.org

Confidential support for anyone in a crisis.

Useful books;

The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook (7th edition) by Martha Davis, Matthew McKay and Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman (2019). Easy-to-use, step-by-step instructions for using progressive relaxation, self-hypnosis, visualisation, mindfulness and more.

Stress Control: A Mind, Body, Life Approach to Boosting your Well-being by Jim White (2017). This accessible, jargon-free book combines clinically proven methods from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), positive psychology and mindfulness to give you tools to improve your mind, body and life.

The Happiness Trap by Dr Russ Harris (2008). Offers techniques using mindfulness skills to enable you to experience a full and happy life and to overcome depression and anxiety.

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is a classic stress assessment instrument. This tool, while originally developed in 1983, remains a popular choice for helping us understand how different situations affect our feelings and our perceived stress.

The questions in this scale ask about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. Although some of the questions are similar, there are differences between them and you should treat each one as a separate question. The best approach is to answer fairly quickly. That is, don't try to count up the number of times you felt a particular way; rather indicate the alternative that seems like a reasonable estimate.

The idea here is to help you recognise the early warning signs of stress so that you can take action to manage it. Simply circle your response on each item.

Once you have completed the scale, simply add up your score for each question and write your total here:

Total: _____

Individual scores on the PSS can range from 0 to 40 with higher scores indicating higher perceived stress.

Scores ranging from 0-13 would be considered low stress.

Scores ranging from 14-26 would be considered moderate stress.

Scores ranging from 27-40 would be considered high perceived stress.

The Perceived Stress Scale is interesting and important because your perception of what is happening in your life is most important. Not everyone will respond the same way to the same experiences. Two individuals could have the exact same events and experiences in their lives for the past month but they could think very differently about those experiences. One person could find them very stressful, while another might not find them stressful at all.

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Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983)

	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Fairly often	Very often
1. In the last month how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?	0	1	2	3	4
2. In the last month how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	0	1	2	3	4
3. In the last month how often have you felt nervous and stressed?	0	1	2	3	4
4. In the last month how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	4	3	2	1	0
5. In the last month how often have you felt that things were going your way?	4	3	2	1	0
6. In the last month how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?	0	1	2	3	4
7. In the last month how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?	4	3	2	1	0
8. In the last month how often have you felt that you were on top of things?	4	3	2	1	0
9. In the last month how often have you been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control?	0	1	2	3	4
10. In the last month how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	0	1	2	3	4